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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000848

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SECDEF FOR OSD

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TAGS: MARR PREL PHUM PGOV BG

SUBJECT: USARPAC COMMANDER BROWN'S MEETING WITH BANGLADESH  
COAS MOEEN

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia Butenis, reason para 1.4 d.

¶1. (C) Summary. In his meetings with COAS General Moeen and other senior Bangladeshi military officers, USARPAC Commander LTG Brown stressed the importance of returning Bangladesh to democratic, elected governance as soon as possible and noted the difficulties the Thai generals have encountered by intervening in politics. Other topics reported USDAO Dhaka septel. End Summary.

¶2. (C) On May 16, General Brown, the Ambassador, and DATT (notetaker) met with Chief of Army Staff LTG Moeen Uddin Ahmed. He noted the difficulties that General Sonthi and the Thai military are experiencing as a result of their coup d'etat and attempts to combat corruption and re-engineer Thailand's political culture. In that context, he hoped that Bangladesh could return to elected, democratic government as soon as possible. General Brown also discussed with Moeen and other senior Bangladeshi military officers U.S. security commitments and cooperation, transformation and modernization, the importance of NCO leadership development, and force modernization strategies for enhancing interoperability (see USDAO Dhaka septel.)

¶3. (C) Moeen said he wished to raise two points. First, he expressed concern over the USG's policy of not training Bangladeshi military members assigned currently or in the past to the paramilitary Rapid Action Battalion (RAB). (Note: The policy stems from RAB's association with extra-judicial killings.) In this situation, Moeen said, Bangladesh might be obliged to stop sending its military personnel for U.S. training. Second, the Bangladesh military is subservient to the caretaker government and operates only in aid to civil authorities, nothing more. The military does not run ministries or a parallel administration, he said, but does provide advice on issues ranging from security to possible reforms in health care and power generation.

¶4. (C) The Ambassador told Moeen that IMET is a State, not a DOD, program, and that as a matter of policy and law we are obligated to vet course nominees on human rights grounds. We are open to proposals for improving the process, she said, but the best solution of course would be for RAB to deal effectively with its human rights problems.

¶5. (C) Moeen described the army as a jack of all trades but master of just one -- peacekeeping. The army is the only entity capable of supporting the Election Commission; the

government wants elections in late 2008, he said, but the army has pushed for early elections at the local level to develop the capacity for successful voter registration and elections at the national level. The army can mobilize personnel to support elections, but involving it in electoral machinery procurements would expose it to corrupt influences.

¶6. (C) In a separate meeting with Principal Staff Officer MG Mohammed Jahangir Alam Chowdhury, General Brown reiterated the dangers of following the Thai "model" and the importance of returning Bangladesh to elected, democratic governance. Jahangir took the points.

¶7. (C) Turning to the Rapid Action Battalion, Jahangir credited it with the arrest and subsequent execution of six senior leaders of Jamaatul Mujahidin Bangladesh, the banned terrorist group responsible for a series of bombings and suicide attacks in late 2005. RAB, he said, is interrogating some 16 suspects picked up after three small bomb blasts on May 1 at railroad stations in Dhaka, Chittagong, and Sylhet, that were claimed by the previously unknown Jadir al-Qaida Bangladesh. Approximately 3500-4000 of the 7000-person RAB comes from the military, with 45 percent from the army, he added. Jahangir blamed negative RAB press reports on sensationalist media and human rights organizations.

¶8. (C) Comment: Moeen's assertion aside of possibly looking for military training elsewhere, the Bangladesh military greatly values IMET because of its value for individual officers and because it enhances the military's overall credibility for lucrative international peacekeeping missions. Preserving a healthy IMET program is also important for the USG because of its significant policy implications, both regional (peacekeeping) and bilateral

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(access to a key institution). Our ban on any nominees with RAB service will take a greater toll on IMET as more and more officers rotate through RAB. To avert a breakdown, we need to consider discreet but effective options for weeding out RAB-affiliated nominees, but in the longer run we may wish to consider an approach that provides for effective vetting based on individual scrutiny rather than an outright institutional ban.

¶9. (C) With the military sending mixed signals on its political intentions, it is essential that we continue to press senior leaders on the importance of restoring Bangladesh's democracy as soon as possible. General Brown's support in this area was therefore very welcomed. His reference to Thailand addressed the widespread perception here that Bangladeshi generals were inspired by their Thai counterparts to take what they characterized as corrective action against a debased political system.

¶10. (SBU) General Brown departed Bangladesh before this message was drafted.

BUTENIS